Literature and Philosophical Progress*

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Abstract. This paper addresses the question of how literary and philosophical thinking can converge in experience of a literary work. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*, dispute this possibility, and this discussion responds to their view, with particular attention to their account of thematic interpretation. Thematic interpretation is presented here as involving thought about the reasons behind a work's use of its content and other features. Those reasons have an implicit generality that allows us to move from literary specificity to general, philosophically significant thought. Philosophy's need for the kind of thinking supported by literature, exploring patterns, priorities and less than universal claims, is defended. George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* and Lydia Davis's story 'Ethics' provide illustrations of the issues.

Keywords. Thematic interpretation; Reasons; Generality; Philosophical understanding; Lamarque and Olsen.

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In bringing literature into my philosophical work, I am moved by a desire "to have my cake and eat it too". By that I mean that I want to let literature be what it is, to be literary, *and* be a philosophically powerful domain. It is not easy to pin down either of the terms here – the literary and the philosophical. Starting with some loose associations, I could press the unreasonableness of my desire by pointing out that literature seems to be a domain of audacity, idiosyncratic expression, delicacy, playfulness, wishing, wallowing, pleasure and unregimented diversity. It is not a domain in which terms are explained and consistently used, general positions and lines of reasoning carefully developed, and in which public debate and shared goals of understanding are at least supposed to unite different thinkers. The constraints on and the possibilities for literary achievement seem to float too free of the demands and aims of philosophical thinking. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen have argued for an in-principle divergence of literature and philosophy, emphasising both the features of philosophical inquiry that are lacking in literary practice and the inappropriateness of imposing philosophical goals on literary works.[1] They offer a strong rebuff of the "have your cake and eat it" tendency. I have made scattered attempts to resist their arguments, and this essay is another attempt.[2]

My approach is, first, to present some of the central views of Lamarque and Olsen concerning the distinction between philosophy and literature. My focus is on how they understand the role of themes and thematic interpretation in literary practice. I respond to their views from two directions, in part offering a view of how to respect the literary "fingerprint" of a work while integrating it into philosophical enquiry, and in part by making a brief case for expanding the conception of activities proper to philosophical

1 I will refer extensively to Lamarque and Olsen's *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. Passages will be cited in the text using the abbreviation *TFL*.

2 E.g., JOHN 1998 and 2003.

practice. The point of this will be to show that there is convergence between what people do as philosophers and readers of literature. I will refer to two literary examples to illustrate how these practices can converge, George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* and Lydia Davis's very short story 'Ethics'. These examples were not chosen at random; I think they make it particularly easy for me to make my case. But my position here is not that one needs to see every work of literature as philosophically engaging, but just that for some works, responding fully to them as literature involves philosophical thinking.

1. Lamarque and Olsen on literary and philosophical practices

Thematic interpretation is of interest, with respect to the literature-philosophy relation, because it involves associating literary works with general concepts and issues that could be the focus of philosophical study. Literary themes "look" like the stuff of philosophy. Lamarque and Olsen consider themes such as the opposition between values of art and values of life and love in several Ibsen plays[3], freedom and determinism in Euripides' *Hippolytus*[4] and, in relation to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the claim that «the best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control»[5]. Taking the subject matter of a work to be the events, places and agents it depicts, thematic concepts «are used to identify the point and purpose of the subject and the way in which the subject is presented»[6]. On Lamarque and Olsen's view, thematic interpretation is built into the activity of literary appreciation. «To recognize something as a literary work is to recognize it as being intended to convey a humanly interesting content»[7], and it is in a work's themes, ideally themes of perennial

3 *TFL*, 374-84.
4 *TFL*, 398-402.
5 *TFL*, 336.
6 *TFL*, 260.
7 *TFL*, 265.

significance, that its deepest, most universally interesting content is formulated[8].

While a literary theme can look like the articulation of a philosophical topic or issue, for Lamarque and Olsen a literary theme has its *raison d'être* in relation to the work it helps to interpret, rather than serving, for instance, the project of philosophical knowledge.

> The statement of a philosophical theme that organizes the identified poetic vision, is, in and for itself, without much significant content. Only by relating the thematic statement back to the literary work does it become anything but empty words. But when the thematic statement is related to the work, it also receives a unique interpretation. The situation represented in a literary work is created through a series of rhetorical and structural means that is the fingerprint of the work. The situation presented by a literary work is therefore unrepeatable.[9]

The interest of a given work's thematic content is not separable from the concrete realization it receives – the way the theme itself is interpreted – in the detailed mode of presentation of subject matter unique to that work. The value of the theme-invoking statements we make in interpreting a work «rests with their value in making sense of the literary work», rather than showing the work to offer a repeatable pattern or «an *exemplum* of a general concept»[10]. On this basis Lamarque and Olsen argue against claims that literature contributes specifically to moral philosophy, as «Any attempt to construe a literary work as part of a moral argument would identify the features of the work that contributed to making the situation in that work 'exemplary', […] the features that would define the situation as *repeatable*»[11]. While we *can* treat a literary work as offering a repeatable

8 *TFL*, 266, 406.
9 *TFL*, 394-5.
10 *TFL*, 402.
11 *TFL*, 395.

example, that is incompatible with treating it as a literary work – it would mean ignoring its unique literary fingerprint. Finally, and importantly, in playing this central role in literary appreciation, «A theme is not the kind of entity that can be true or false. Rather it is *interesting* or *uninteresting*»[12].

For Lamarque and Olsen, philosophical practice, in contrast, is like the sciences in being a practice of enquiry «based on a conception of truth and truth-telling». Its enquiries are «located within a nexus of activities such as making judgements, reasoning, providing evidence, questioning, debating, falsifying, and so forth»[13]. The philosopher aims to reach truths that can be held as knowledge, rather than prioritizing the interestingness of ideas, and this means that evidence and argument have an essential role in philosophical practice: the truths are reached by processes governed by the aim of providing justification[14]. They point out, persuasively, that views claiming literature provides forms of knowledge commonly do not show how to distinguish «genuine and merely putative knowledge», leaving us too often with claims to the effect that literature can help us to see «things in a new light»[15]. Lamarque and Olsen marshal a range of examples and evidence to show that literary practice is not constituted by the activities and goals essential to a truth-seeking practice of enquiry. They emphasize that we do not seem to evaluate a work of literature by assessing the truth value of thematic statements important to interpreting the work.[16]

12 *TFL*, 437.
13 *TFL*, 368.
14 *TFL*, 368-9.
15 *TFL*, 380.
16 See, e.g., *TFL*, 297-300 and 331-8. See Rowe 1997, Stecker 2012, and John 2016b for some counterclaims about literary practice.

2. Can a philosophical enquirer respect a literary footprint?

It seems right that one can extract a set of features from a literary work, for purposes of generalisation, in such a way that one is not drawing on the work's literary qualities. Perhaps Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes, when cited by philosophers as an example of a fictional character, loses whatever distinctively literary significance he has as a character. All we are concerned with is that Sherlock Holmes exemplifies two very general features: being attributed some human or agential features in a work of fiction and not actually realizing any of those features. Sherlock Holmes becomes an easily repeatable paradigm in the service of philosophical discourse. Less extremely, a philosopher might cite a philosophically interesting combination of features attributed to a fictional character or event, to illustrate a certain idea or issue (say, weakness of will or moral luck or the constituents of an emotion). Although attending to that combination of features might be quite important to appreciating the literary work, what the philosopher might well be interested in drawing from the work in such cases would be a neatly extractable and repeatable pattern. Lamarque and Olsen lead us to press the question of how one could move fruitfully from a unique literary work to philosophical discourse that seeks generality and that relies on claims meshing with each other conceptually and logically. Is it inevitable that in making such a move, one will betray the way meaning emerges in the specific interpretive relations between literary subject and theme?

In denying any such inevitability, I want in part to build on Lamarque and Olsen's point that literary practice involves interpretive response to a work. The literarily "flattening" appeals to works, as understood by Lamarque and Olsen, seem to focus on their representational and thematic content: the sets of features attributed to a character or a represented world, and the thematic meanings we assign to them, that can provide exemplars or patterns for

generalization – the content of our thoughts as to what a work is about. However, the experiential and reflective processes that generate that content are the core of literary practice, and they are an odd mixture of individually unique activity and repeatable, generalizable thinking. Of course, as specific events of reading and interpretation occurring in a given reader's life, they are unique and unrepeatable, and probably not even adequately knowable to the reader. It is hard to introspect about the delicate movements of one's experience, feeling and thought as a reader.[17] But in reaching some ideas about what a work is importantly about, those processes surface in a way that aspires to be interpersonally defensible and adequate to the work. We try to use the partially unreflective and experientially complex input of the reading experience to make sense of what the work is importantly about. This involves asking questions, as Lamarque and Olsen say, about the points and purposes served by the work's specificities of subject, language, tone and structure. We carry out a steady (if also ordinarily somewhat lazily articulated) questioning of what all of this amounts to.

In many cases, it is not precisely the content that is relevant, but what might be called the how and the why of the use of that content in the work. What is assumed to be worth saying and for what reason, what is neglected or suppressed (and again, why), what is circled around obsessively or inconclusively? What gets to show up as funny, dull, frightening, charming or disastrous? How does this work's approach to whatever it represents differ from other approaches or from what one might expect? Such questions about how and why a work uses its elements as it does enable one to reach ideas about theme. But when these ideas gain plausibility for a reader, their plausibility is not just based on seeing that the thematic concepts are instantiated in the detailed subject matter of the work. The thematic thinking also includes positing or constructing a kind of space of

17 As Susan Feagin notes, «one can respond appropriately to features of a work of fictional literature without knowing that one is and without being able to defend the claim that one is» (Feagin 1996, 159). Feagin gives unusually deft reconstructions of possible «shifts, slides, and sensitivities» in reading experience (see chapters 3-5).

reasons in which one can see a point to instantiating and varying a theme in these ways. This space of reasons is filled out in the reader's thinking about whether it makes sense to interpret this subject matter in these thematic terms, in positing reasons for instantiating a theme in this way, and in considering whether this thematic realization is important or worth doing – does it illuminate the issue articulated by the theme? These interpretive activities can lead fairly directly into generalizing or generalizable thought because, even if initiated by quite small-scale input, the questions raised concern relevance relations, purposes and the importance of the thematic "angle" offered. Answering such questions implicitly calls on the reader's grasp of not just the elements to be interpreted, but on some more-or-less general views on what can be relevant to a thing's meaning, what can count as a purpose for a certain sort of element, and what needs illumination in a given context. So, to the extent that readers interpret the work as embodying reasons for using representational content and other elements in a thematically charged way, the reader reaches some ideas about the work that have general, repeatable import. The detailed relation between subject and theme with its unique literary fingerprint is not ignored, but that relation is approached as answering (ideally) to a demand to have reasons for constructing a work in this way, with this meaning. While those reasons concern the work's fingerprint, their reasonableness is not simply given or constituted by the work's self-contained way of proceeding. We test this kind of reasonableness in a complex way, in *part* by letting the work build up its own context in which things "make sense" in a work-anchored way (often supported by literary and genre conventions), but also by implicitly placing the work in some larger comparison class of real and possible projects of expression and representation. We draw on a context of activities and concerns that stretch beyond the work and whatever it offers, to recognize what is particular to and of interest in this particular project. As interpreters we are testing whether such meaning can be supported in these terms and what the point of doing so could be, and those are general

questions, taking us "outside" the work into larger practices of identifying meaning, purpose and importance.

Although it is difficult for most readers to articulate their views on the "space of reasons" built into a work, these views can emerge in discussion and argument. I take this kind of discussion – about whether fictional events can be found meaningful in certain ways and about the possible reasons for pursuing a given meaning-making project – to be central to literature's relevance to philosophical enquiry. Let me give one example of the kind of argument that can grow out of literary interpretation. Lamarque and Olsen give a detailed reading of the following passage, concerning the character Dr Lydgate, from Chapter 15 of George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*:

> Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of his noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling about furniture, or women […]. He did not mean to think of furniture at present; but whenever he did so, it was to be feared that neither biology nor schemes of reform would lift him above the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best.[18]

Here is part of Lamarque and Olsen's reading, including mention of the thematic statement they appeal to in their interpretation.

> The ironic tone of the passage also underlines that Lydgate's weaknesses and the influence of Middlemarch are not only forces beyond the control of Lydgate himself but are also beyond the limits of his intellectual grasp. They can therefore destroy him all the more effectively. It is only when grasping the passage in some such way that the reader appreciates it properly as an aesthetic element in the work. However, this

18 ELIOT 1880 [1871], 134; quoted at *TFL*, 335.

> appreciation does not involve the reader asking further questions about the truth of the proposition 'The best human hopes and aspirations are always thwarted by forces beyond human control'.[19]

That is, the reader does not pursue the questions that a philosopher would ask. Of such a thematic statement, Lamarque and Olsen say, we require that it be intelligible, but not that it be true, as «It is the *content* of the proposition, what it is about, that confers interest on the Lydgate story»[20]. Now, to respond well to Lamarque and Olsen's interpretation would be a long task, calling for attention to a long novel. I will initiate a response by saying that I take there to be a lot to argue about here. The Lydgate story is indeed about a gifted, aspiring person whose noble aims come mostly to nothing. The traits and «spots of commonness» that make him vulnerable to frustration of his aims seem to be only partially visible to him, even after long experience. His eventual career of catering to wealthy patients is summarized, damningly: «In brief, Lydgate was what is called a successful man»[21]. But why is his story told in this novel? When Lydgate is introduced, the narrating-authorial voice says, «The man was still in the making […] and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding»[22]. His story is told, I would say (in my attempt to understand the reasons behind his story), to make sure that we feel the potential for great good in a life and feel the waste and wrongness in it coming to nought. But that it comes to nought does not seem to be a matter of what is "always" the case. The virtues could have expanded and the faults could have shrunk. Interpretations can importantly disagree on precisely such matters of quantification: should we see universal principles or messier "sometimes" principles in operation? Tzachi Zamir makes a persuasive case for the significance of literature to our need to establish principles that are not

19 *TFL*, 335-6.
20 *TFL*, 329, 330.
21 Eliot 1880 [1871], 749.
22 Eliot 1880 [1871], 133.

«a categorical 'For all cases of type X, Y is the case'» but rather «a particular affirmative or negative judgment of the form: 'For some cases of X, Y is the case'»[23]. If we take Lydgate's story as instantiating a "sometimes Y is the case" principle, then we can ask further questions about the conditions that make the difference. We can experience the world of *Middlemarch* not as one in which human aspirations are doomed, but as one in which the details of education, social convention, contingencies of friendship and love, laws and political life, and individual virtues and vices put noble aspirations at risk. In disagreeing about thematic interpretation, we can argue about the reasons and purposes embodied in the work, and these will concern the real commitments and aims of the project undertaken in the work (not just the internal realization of thematically meaningful elements).

The reader of Eliot's novel also has to situate the point of telling Lydgate's story in relation to other characters' stories. Dorothea Brooke's life is summed up quite differently in the final paragraphs of the novel.

> Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state […] But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life.[24]

Like Lydgate, Dorothea is an exemplar of «the best human hopes and aspirations», and one could say that her aspirations were thwarted. The tangible output of her life seems to be that she has a happy life as a wife and mother. That she is a woman in her time seems to be one of the crucial conditions obstructing her ability to have a broader, more substantial impact, but it is also due, as with Lydgate, to her

23 Zamir 2007, 8.

24 Eliot 1880 [1871], 752.

temperament and the people with whom she falls in love. However, this final passage makes a plea for less easily measurable criteria of evaluation – for «incalculably diffusive» good effects. With Dorothea and other characters in mind, it is possible to finish this novel with some fairly concrete ideas about how to change society so that people's aspirations are not inevitably thwarted (do not stifle the talents and ideas of women, strengthen economic fairness, enforce transparency in banking(!), for example). The mix of characters and their fates, and such partial contrasts as the one between Lydgate and Dorothea, can lead a reader to gravitate toward the relevance of "sometimes" principles.

Lamarque and Olsen are elsewhere incisively attentive to the narrating and authorial presence Eliot has in her fiction. She is «notorious as an intrusive author, often given to lecturing, certainly one to prompt and push a reader in his judgements», but they temper this account by noting that she is «scrupulous in presenting diverse points of view»[25]. «George Eliot never allows us to rest with a stock judgement. We are confronted with an enormously varied range of attitudes […], shifting constantly and subtly through the novel. […] She will not rest until all points of view have been aired»[26]. They further note that in some of her interventions she nudges her readers to reflect «*on* the characterization» rather than just responding «to the intrinsic descriptions themselves» (e.g., notice which characters either author or reader tends to neglect and consider why this is): she invites readers «to stand back and reflect on the very process of acquiring information about characters»[27]. Here Lamarque and Olsen articulate important features that can feed into interpretation. I would say that this novel, in its narration and in what it asks of readers, is partly about scrupulousness and ethical concern in one's acquisition of knowledge. The reader who works through Eliot's immensely fine-grained, cumulative explorations of characters will be forming a sense

25 *TFL*, 140.
26 *TFL*, 141.
27 *TFL*, 142.

of the "why" behind this novel's characterizations – in the space of reasons built into *Middlemarch*, extended scrupulousness is needed and much of importance is hidden from routine, conventional observation.

Returning to the question of how thematic thinking can move (somewhat) seamlessly into philosophical thinking, the point I want to draw from discussion of *Middlemarch* is that development of thematic content integrates the processes of taking in what the work offers and of understanding reasons for those elements. Those reasons are implicitly general and positing them can open up issues worth arguing about (e.g., about universal or less-than-universal patterns, about what can be understood from juxtaposing two life stories, about the qualities of observation, thought and feeling needed for representation of human events). I find *Middlemarch* to be a powerful case for resisting Lamarque and Olsen's approach because it seems obvious to me that Eliot wants us to accept – *really accept* – reasons for representing lives in certain ways: scrupulously and with multiply critical and sympathetic access, and as complicated, fragile mixtures of potential for good and vulnerability to waste and frustration. The strong interventions of a narrating-authorial voice, in this particular novel, make it hard to read it as a novel unconcerned with the extra-literary project of understanding lives. That project need not be built into the reasons behind every work of literature, but I have here initiated an argument that the literary fingerprint of *Middlemarch* makes that project central. If one ascribes an implausibly strong thematic meaning to Lydgate's story (that noble aspirations are always thwarted by factors we cannot control), it is easier to suggest that thematic assertion and truth are irrelevant: if that *were* the thematic claim, it would indeed be unpromising to tie the interest of the novel to its truth. Deriving a "sometimes" thematic claim from Lydgate's story means engaging rather with a claim that has a greater chance of truth and that turns us back to the novel for further thinking about what supports and stymies aspirations. Lamarque and Olsen would not deny that the thematic claim returns us to the work's detailed features,

as that is their own view of the mutual interpretation of subject and theme. What I think they would not grant is that in the effort to see how and why Lydgate's story is meaningful, the reader will be considering the possible reasons for telling his story in this way, and the intelligibility of such reasons is not fictional, as it were – real possibilities for relevance, purpose and importance will inform interpretation.[28]

So far I have made some positive claims about what we are doing as thematic interpreters, aiming to highlight the role of understanding reasons for making a work meaningful. Let me briefly sketch a more negative response to Lamarque and Olsen's approach. When I try to think of what it would be like to interpret a work without invoking what I am casting as a genuine space of reasons, I end up with something like this: the novel links and contrasts, say, Lydgate and Dorothea because they make an interesting, complex comparison around the theme of failed aspiration. On this model, the interest lies in the content generated by the comparing activity: what matters is that the content is intelligible, and perhaps that there is a good deal we can think or say, and that we can formulate it with precision and subtlety.[29] Lamarque and Olsen take the best themes, the perennial themes, to be topics of enduring human interest, which seems true, but also like a wheel that does not need to spin on this account. If the work's way of developing a theme does not constitute a real "move" with respect to that topic (e.g., an attempt to understand or otherwise address this topic, as something of importance to us), then it is not clear why it would matter that the theme is of perennial interest. Why not develop intelligible, precise, subtle treatments of anything whatsoever? That we would be interested in such a comparison because we give it a chance to bear on how we actually understand, say, failure of aspirations seems to be a more straightforward and solid basis for interest in a work's themes. Spinning out a subtle, precise line

28 This argument is related to the discussion in JOHN 2016a.

29 Lamarque and Olsen: «in literary appreciation it is the 'specificity' and 'subtlety' and 'boldness' of the artistic vision, the vision which is apprehended through thematic interpretation, which is the focus of interest» (*TFL*, 403).

of thought can of course be part of what we appreciate in literary experience. But the intrinsic "interestingness" of the content of this thinking, and the fact that the work has the power to propel us along this content-bearing path, are a quite weak basis for explaining the interest of a theme. If a theme *is* of independent human interest, as Lamarque and Olsen require, it seems its interest even in its development within a work of literary fiction has to lie in the fact that there is something of concern to people that we formulate and try to understand by engaging with that thematic development. It is true that we do not infer that a work lacks literary worth on the basis of judging it to be wrong-headed or actively false in its development of thematic content. But that does not mean we take that development to be irrelevant to understanding. It can still be the case that a literary development of theme is of interest to us because that development makes an attempt to understand something of concern to us, perhaps a controversial move that we reject.[30] (I will say a bit more to complicate the relation between understanding, truth and philosophy in the next section.) A reader of course does not have to accept that a work of literature embodies good reasons in how it proceeds, but in seeking to find meaning and purpose in its elements readers aim to put the work-internal elements into an intelligible space of reasons. Our thematic thinking thus links the literary fingerprint to general ideas, questions and principles.

3. Why is philosophical progress difficult?

In Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, the work of her philosopher

30 See Stecker on appreciation of nihilistic fiction that explores a view one rejects (Stecker 2008, 159), and Zamir on distinguishing «voices that are valuable to have, and those that encapsulate values that one takes to be correct» (Zamir 2007, 41). Stecker affirms that philosophy and literature share an openness to the cognitive value of the false or the not obviously true: «Just as in philosophy, we do not value most writing that sets out views we agree with […] we value writing that effectively challenges our beliefs» (Stecker 2012, 18).

character Mr Ramsay is envisioned using an analogy between philosophical progress and a kind of alphabetical piano keyboard:

> For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q. […] But after Q? What comes next? […] Still, if he could reach R, it would be something. […] R is then – what is R? […] A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R.[31]

This is not an immediately flattering image of philosophical labour: the orderly pressing of keys is a seemingly shallow achievement that comes inexplicably to a halt, and the lizard's eyelid perhaps summons up utter indifference to human reflection. It is hard to be confident that there would be an important difference between Q and R. There is also the non-philosophical jockeying and insecurity in the image, of clinging to Q as a relatively privileged achievement that at least sets him apart from other thinkers. But perhaps it is also an elegant image of the inexplicable difficulty of moving with reason from a point one understands to a further point. It seems one ought to be able to tell what comes next, if one really understands the point one has reached. The image makes it seem as if there is clarity, order and good sense all the way to Q. But whatever substance is built into the well-ordered path to Q, it resists showing the substantial way to proceed. Even with its sharp edge of humour, and fairly merciless dissection of a character's limitations, I think Woolf's image is also a lovely image for the stymied moments of philosophical thinking. One can experience a rift between what seems obvious and what cannot even be formulated clearly. In the image's evocation of musical and alphabetical order,

31 Woolf 1927, 53-4.

unsettling questions are lightly raised: where do the constraints and forms of order a philosopher takes for granted come from? Do they go deep enough in offering insight? I would say that the imagined impasse at Q, with the goal of somehow figuring out how to move on from it, is a good image for important phases of philosophical enquiry.

One way of explaining the stymied moments is that the forms of order and progress that philosophers rely on have important limitations. Consider some paradigmatic philosophical activities: generalisation from instances, analysis of concepts, and argument in its various forms (deductive, inductive and abductive). To generalise helpfully we need some idea of what features things have *importantly* in common, and observation of those things does not inevitably bring with it "importance markers". We are likely to need to try out different patterns and priorities for grouping things, and to reflect on which groupings interest us. To analyse a concept, aiming to unpack essential requirements for its application, is strangely difficult for competent users of a concept (and we can argue about why that is and perhaps reject the analysis project). There seems to be a gap between effectively recognizing and distinguishing things in the world in conceptual terms and reflectively knowing the bases on which we do this. Deductive argument, though in some sense an ideal, is conservative with respect to content; we do not get more out of it than we already had in the premises. So generating plausible, relevant premises to work with is crucial to the fruitfulness of deductive argument, and premises emerge from many sources and modes of observation, reflection and argument (such as inductive and abductive reasoning, which in turn have openness and constraints that are not self-evident). While generalisation, analysis and argument are central, valuable modes of philosophical activity, they all have roots in, and are beholden to, less transparent, less easy-to-regulate projects of gathering, organizing, and prioritizing relevant materials. If we grant that the paradigmatic philosophical activities have built-in limitations, and need to be coordinated with such projects as pattern formation and recognition, testing for priority and importance, and generation of

plausible, apt premises, then we have some insight into why philosophical progress is difficult and can reach an impasse. The paradigms of order and good sense are usually not able to carry out the ice-breaking, new-pattern-exposing, priority-claiming, and content-establishing activity needed for philosophical progress. My claim here, of course, is that literature is a domain in which such less transparent but also philosophically essential projects can be carried out.

Before turning to a concluding literary example, I want to note some ideas about philosophy that I take to be implicitly sympathetic to or actively supportive of this claim. I have already mentioned Tzachi Zamir's argument for the importance of non-universal knowledge (for the prevalence of "Some X are Y" issues), especially in the realm of moral principles. He also argues for the potential of literary experience, because of its experiential impact, to move us beyond impasses on «foundational questions of value» that cannot be resolved by argument[32]. David Davies supports the potential of literary fiction for philosophical thought experiment on the basis that response to fiction can «mobilize unarticulated cognitive resources based in experience. The fiction […] makes manifest constant patterns underlying the complexity of actual experience»[33]. More broadly, Catherine Elgin and Neil Cooper argue persuasively for the importance of philosophical *understanding*, distinguishing understanding from knowledge of truths. Their accounts of understanding suggest or, in Elgin's case, explicitly claim that it makes sense to look to art and literature for understanding. Cooper says that «understanding a fact or truth involves being able to appreciate its importance and this involves a value-judgement of the relative importance of the different things we know»[34]. He uses metaphors of exploration and spatial orientation, presenting understanding as «knowing how to get from one part to another, how to *connect* them,

32 Zamir 2007, 93.
33 Davies 2007, 160.
34 Cooper 1994, 4.

and how to *distinguish* them»[35]. Understanding is «open-ended» in that it is shown in the ability «to ask new questions to which answers are not yet known»[36]. Elgin emphasises the value of understanding drawn from models that are strictly false: «Effective models afford an understanding of their targets because their simplifications, idealizations, elaborations, and distortions make salient important features of the targets»[37]. She emphasizes our stance as goal-directed enquirers, aiming «to structure, synthesize, organize, and orient ourselves toward things in ways that serve our ends»[38]. In interpreting a model, we try to grasp «how, in what respects, and with what degree of precision the model represents»[39]. Elgin links literary fictions and scientific models as similarly constituting a «cognitive environment where certain aspects of their subjects stand out. They thereby facilitate recognition of those aspects and appreciation of their significance»[40]. The selective and goal-serving nature of such models means that they are never perfect or comprehensive, but always marginalise or obscure some aspects of what they seek to represent.[41] These latter points about simultaneously revealing and obscuring resonate with discussions of literature's power to give us important but partial insights.[42] To sum up some of the points gestured at here: philosophy, if philosophy seeks understanding, partial and non-universal knowledge, and access to non- or not-yet conceptualised cognitive resources, needs to embrace methods, thinking and experience suited to those goals.

35 Cooper 1994, 4.

36 Cooper 1994, 10.

37 Elgin 2017, 249.

38 Elgin 2017, 250.

39 Elgin 2017, 253.

40 Elgin 2017, 258.

41 Elgin 2017, 263-71.

42 E.g., Jollimore notes that different metaphors «that are at the very least practically and psychologically incompatible – in the sense that no human agent could see reality in both ways at once – can nonetheless be regarded as insightful, and even as true» (Jollimore 2009, 156). Gibson distinguishes the truth about a cultural ethos from the moral truth about that ethos (Gibson 2011, 84-5).

4. Can literature help make philosophical progress?

I will conclude with one suggestive example, an extremely short story by Lydia Davis. As noted above, this choice is intended to make my argumentative life easier. The story, 'Ethics', involves a character directly discussing a question of philosophical ethics. Nonetheless, I do not think I am "cheating"; if I need to show the possibility of philosophical and literary convergence, even one story can provide evidence. Here is the entire story:

> 'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.' I heard, on an interview program about ethics, that this concept underlies all systems of ethics. If you really do unto your neighbour as you would have him do unto you, you will be living according to a good system of ethics. At the time, I was pleased to learn of a simple rule that made such sense. But now, when I try to apply it literally to one person I know, it doesn't seem to work. One of his problems is that he has a lot of hostility toward certain other people and when I imagine how he would have them do unto him I can only think he would in fact want them to be hostile toward him, as he imagines they are, because he is already so very hostile toward them. He would also want them to be suspicious of him to the same degree that he is suspicious of them, and bitter about him as he is bitter about them, because his feelings against them are so strong that he needs the full strength of what he imagines to be their feelings against him in order to continue feeling what he wants to feel against them. So, really, he is already doing unto those certain others as he would have them do unto him, though in fact it occurs to me that at this point he is only having certain feelings about them and not doing anything to them, so he may still be quite within some system of ethics, unless to feel something toward someone is in fact to

do something to that person.[43]

The pleasure of reading this seems to lie partly in the way it flirts with simply being a stretch of philosophical argument. Exploring and reconstructing this story's "space of reasons" seems to include thinking about why it is so close to being that and yet is not simply that. We can identify it as a story, perhaps a bit hesitantly, because it does have a sketchy narrative set-up. Something was heard (on the radio? perhaps a show with an ethicist?), and it triggered two reactions, one of which involves mentioning an acquaintance. So the reader can situate the narrating thinker's activity in a larger world of people and discourse, and her claims about the impact of that world. Although we learn very little about this larger world, it does not seem that we can jettison it as irrelevant to the story's "fingerprint", as we might quickly leave behind a philosopher's mention of when and with whom an issue first came to mind. That the story portrays an individual reacting to the promulgation of ideas in her world is made salient – it is selected for attention. Even though such reactions are exactly what nearly every piece of philosophical writing conveys as well, the phenomena of individual response are paradigmatically *not* made salient in philosophy. The reader of the story can thus ask why one would write a story that makes this salient.

The specific line of thought that unfolds in the story starts with an ethical rule, taken most directly from the Bible but having an older, broader lineage, that is perhaps stymieing because it seems so sensible.[44] If one has soaked up an ethical education, it may have a nearly platitudinous quality. What is there to think about or argue with in "do unto others"? This narrator proceeds to ask a new

43 Davis 2009, 289-90.

44 From Matthew 7:12: «Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets» (King James translation). The story summons up the other ethical chestnut, "love thy neighbour", by introducing that word ("If you really do unto your neighbour"). Whether these rules coincide, or whether loving thy neighbour as thyself is a rather different demand, is another question the story efficiently summons up.

question and partially unravels the rule, by persistently thinking things that it seems one should not think. I will note two of the "wrong thoughts": the narrator imagines what another would want others to do unto him (instead of using herself as a "you" who needs to interpret and act on the rule), and she picks someone filled with hostility as her test case. This is the wrong person, and the wrong kind of person, to imagine when testing a foundational ethical rule. It is somehow inappropriate to think about a particular person at all, rather than a generalized exemplar of human nature without any idiosyncratic rough edges. In reacting to this story one can follow out one's own intricate reasoning about the ethical rule at hand. Why *not* start with someone else, and indeed with a hostile person, if the rule applies to all? And why isn't the rule "Do unto others as they would have you do unto them" anyway? These are the beginnings of reflection triggered by the story, basically letting it present an imagined counterexample. I think the questions raised here are independently interesting in philosophical terms. Does an ethical rule of such simplicity depend on complicated or circular or controversial assumptions about what people should want or what would count as a genuinely reciprocal relation? The final sentence of the story also directly poses a philosophical question about whether feelings are themselves "doings unto others". This is a story from which one might happily extract general, repeatable content without much care for a literary fingerprint.

To find the literary and the philosophical converging in this story, one has to consider what could belong in its "space of reasons". As Lamarque and Olsen would agree, the point of the story does not seem to be to reject this ethical rule. The story does not resolve its tangle of issues. It uses its brief, intense form to make salient the individual attempting to re-think a supposedly solid kernel of ethical understanding. It uses its increasingly long, syntactically elaborate (yet doggedly coherent) sentences to hint at an endless proliferation of complications and qualifications, arising perhaps whenever one has to switch perspectives, from one person to another or within one's own

set of shifting concerns and motives. The narrative content, despite being so sparse, "taints" the general philosophical content with possible perspectives and concerns. We cannot simply take the hostile person as an imagined counterexample; even this scant hint of a human relationship introduces a kind of "human impurity" into the reasoning. Are the narrator's intrusive imaginings about the other's desires to be trusted? Who is the hostile person here, and where is the hostility coming from? The story will not let its readers simply question the applicability of "doing unto others", because the apparently scrupulous reasoning is simultaneously the evidence of emotional "doings" and possibly of great personal antagonism. The story, though not leaving us with a cogent objection to "do unto others", does leave us with a general problem, about how the impersonal clarity and intelligibility of an ethical rule can meet the ragged, fixating, imbalanced substance of individual thought and feeling. Exploring the reasons for setting philosophical thinking within this tiny human narrative lead at least to that generalizable issue. An aspect of the literary fingerprint that this discussion neglects, and that should not be neglected, is that the story is funny. It would be important, in a philosophically full engagement with the story, to consider how the humour too helps one reach the problem of ethical systems meeting human beings.

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